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ABSTRACT

A technique called "co-communication" was developed to improve the listening skills of dental school faculty. In co-communication, paired individuals take turns playing the roles of talker and listener for designated times, usually about 20 minutes each. The structure of the sessions and their continuity are necessary to ensure individual growth in communication skills and awareness. The process of co-communication increases a speaker's awareness of what it takes to be truly heard, and it helps listeners to become receptive enough to truly understand what speakers say. The co-communication technique has been used in sessions with 75 dental instructors, over 90% of whom reported improvements in their listening skills as a result of the training. Co-communication has also been used with school principals, gaming and movement workshop participants, teachers of the academically talented, and religious groups. If one of the goals of education is to become better at receiving and interpreting data from the environment, then co-communication is a tool for reaching that end. (RL)

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CO-COMMUNICATION: RESULTS OF TEACHING DENTAL FACULTY SKILLS IN LISTENING

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While training dental school professors in alternative forms of dental education (Yanoff, Allender and Landay, 1976), a technique was developed to increase the listening skills of faculty. This article will describe the technique (called "co-communication") and report what occurred when used in subsequent training programs.

Our major purposes in these workshops were to get dental faculty to ask questions such as: "How am I presently teaching? Where do I want to go with my students? How can I get there? How will I know if I am successful? Where do I get feedback?" From our background in group processes and interpersonal communications, we knew that open dialogues between members of the faculty was essential and that each individual had to be able to hear what his colleagues and students

CS205559

were telling him (Silberman, Allender and Yanoff, 1976). However, as workshop leaders, we saw the participants as being "closed," and we did not want to increase internal defense mechanisms that were already built. No one would be willing to listen, much less hear one another. We noticed that although participants often talked about hearing others, their behaviors indicated something else. Thus, it was necessary to model open dialogues in the workshops.

Our problems as leaders was to help faculty to open up communication so that the one who was speaking felt that he was really being heard, and the one who was listening was receptive enough to truly understand what the speaker was saying. We also believed that as teachers it was important to model good listening habits for the classrooms. In the past, teachers have tended to be mostly interested in giving information and students were simply receptors. What follows is the description and results of the model. Co-communication was adapted from work by H. Jackins (3, 4).

DESCRIPTION

Co-communication is designed for two people. It should be done in a place where each can say what he wants without feeling that anyone else can hear him. To begin, each person chooses to play a role as either

the "talker" or "listener" for a designated time (usually twenty minutes to start). The talker is given the opportunity to talk about anything he wishes. For the first co-communication session, we often will give suggestions for starting; for example, "talk about a specific problem you are having in your teaching." The talker is told that he has an opportunity to speak freely, go into any depth he wishes and will not be interrupted. An initial reaction of participants before beginning is to say, "I can't talk for twenty minutes straight; I don't have enough to say." Needless to say, they come back from the session amazed at the fact that they have not had enough time.)

The listener also plays a particular role. He is asked not to respond to the talker but rather be an "active listener" and "clarifier." As an active listener, he is to try to absorb as much as possible what the talker is saying. He is not allowed to respond; temptations are to "piggyback" that is, "Oh that happened to me once; let me tell you what I did." As one can readily see, the listener, in this case, has shifted the emphasis and become the talker. Yanoff (1975) refers to this as "centering" - shifting interactive situations so that conversation centers on oneself rather than others. The listener in co-communication can ask the talker questions; however, these

questions must help the talker clarify for himself. If the talker feels the question does not help him, he need not answer it. One can note that the listener's role is not as a respondent. We know this is not natural in day-to-day communication. However, to get participants to realize how much they talk and how little they listen, the process had to be exaggerated. It was amazing to us how great the problem was for teachers to be quiet and listen rather than always being in the talking role. Research by Amidon and Flanders (1962) concurs with the extent of teacher talk in a classroom versus student talk. They contend that learning increases when teacher talk is reduced and student talk increases. It is also interesting to note that students learn most when they are actively involved (talking most) in the classroom (Yanoff, 1972, and Allender, 1976). Also, it was quite important to help each participant to be aware of his feelings while listening. Obviously, if one was having problems listening in a one-to-one situation under least threatening conditions, we asked the question, "What happened when you face a full class?"

After one person spoke for twenty minutes and the other listened, we then asked them to switch roles - the talker now listening and vice versa.

When each had had an opportunity to be both listener and talker, we asked them to process what they had done

(Yanoff, Allender and Landay, 1976), By process, we meant for them to not answer any questions raised in the co-communication session but rather to ask, "What did I learn about myself?" We asked participants at first to use the handle, "I learned..." The processing took only five minutes in length. When they had completed the processing, the last step was to schedule their next meeting time. This guaranteed that at least another session would be held. We found that this was a critical step because individuals were so busy and tended to miss their co-communication session unless structure was established. We feel that people should not be pushed. However, within the design there needs to be a built-in mechanism to insure continued sessions. Individuals grow from this process, yet it is slow and demands time, energy and openness. One co-communication session is not enough to change an individual dramatically.

RESULTS

After using co-communication sessions with three different groups of dental instructors (N=75) with very positive results -- over 90% claiming it had helped them become better listeners and had made them more aware of the dynamics of verbal interaction, we have now taught the process to other groups with similar results. We have used it with principals in school systems, teachers

of the academically talented, religious groups, gaming and movement workshop participants, and for our own personal growth.

There are several cautions/suggestions that need to be noted about using co-communication for training purposes. First, there needs to be enough time to do the complete process in a relaxed way (usually an hour and a half). Participants need to hear the rules and understand them in advance. Leaders need to emphasize that co-communication demands that they adhere to the time parameters. However, they can be free to operate within the boundaries. Since participants are often unwilling to begin immediately, we ask them to try it once and then come back as a large group to discuss what they consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the co-communication process. We also found that once instructors used this tool, they found it very useful in their own classrooms. Obviously, we are suggesting that those readers who feel that this process is useful will include it in your own instruction. We have found from our own experience and participant feedback that a natural outcome from this process is a greater understanding of oneself. Lastly, for those of us in the field of education who believe that the affective domain is important and needs increased emphasis along with the cognitive input will find this an extremely useful tool.

OVERVIEW

Co-communication has been presented as a tool developed to help dental instructors to listen to one another in a workshop setting. It was designed and tested; it was so successful that it was then used in other teacher-training situations. The steps are as follows: Each person chooses a partner for learning co-communication. The directions are: (1) One person speaks at a time and the other listens. (2) The time allotted, at least half an hour, is divided in half listening and half talking, with a five minute wrap-up session at the very end. If the time allotted, for example, is one hour (as in the training program) each person speaks for approximately twenty-five minutes or whatever he or she chooses. (3) The listener may interrupt only if he doesn't understand something. This limitation of interaction is for clarification only, and it is critical that it be followed closely. (4) When both people have had an opportunity to speak on what was relevant for himself, they then proceed to process their experience. Processing is short (about five minutes) and focuses on the insights that occurred while communicating in this structure.

It is suggested that co-communication is also useful for student dialogue. The process is simple; the results complex. If one of our goals in education is to become better receivers of data from our environment,

then co-communication is a tool for aiding us to reach that end.

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